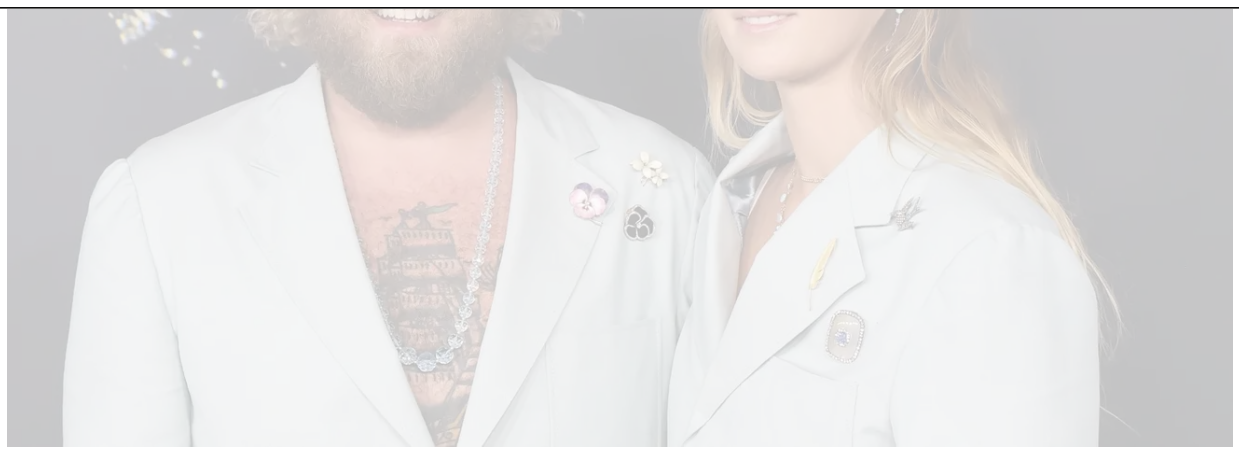

Photo: Taylor Hill (Getty Images)

Over the weekend, Jonah Hill's ex-girlfriend Sarah Brady shared disturbing texts Hill sent her during their relationship, which then spread across the internet like a rash—and understandably so. Here was a male celebrity who had built a brand around being an evolved man, and who released a Netflix documentary about the transformative power of therapy (starring his own therapist). And Hill's language in his texts with Brady very much reflect this time in therapy.

The screenshots show Hill telling Brady what she can and can't do if she wants to remain in a relationship with him. (Their relationship ended sometime in the first half of 2022.) His insistence that Brady delete Instagram photos of herself in vaguely revealing clothing (of which Brady had a few—she is, after all, a professional surfer), and stop being friendly—or even surf—with men and "wild" girls is painted over with the gloss of what's been deemed "therapy speak": the prescriptive language and vocabulary of therapy used to justify selfish, even manipulative, behaviors.

At one point, Brady texts Hill that she's deleted photos of herself in a swimsuit—which is akin to a professional basketball player deleting all photos of himself in a jersey—to which Hill condescendingly replies, "Good start. You don't seem to get it. But it's not my place to teach you. I've made my boundaries clear. You refuse to let go of some [photos] and you've made that clear. I hope they make you happy."

Hill's use of the word "boundaries" here couldn't be more deliberate; the relatively recent hyper-commercialization of therapy and its popularity among social media influencers have made "boundaries" a buzzword, and the act of setting boundaries a noble, self-aware thing to do. Under the guise of this language, Hill's emotionally abusive demands of Brady seem infinitely more benign.

But setting boundaries is something you do for yourself—not an excuse or moral justification to control others. This wasn't about giving Brady a real choice; it was entirely about power, and Brady has said in her social media posts that she now recognizes Hill's behavior as emotionally abusive. No matter what language you use, however progressive and sophisticated it may be, as sociologist Dr. Nicole Bedera said on Twitter of Hill's texts, "There is no 'nice' way to be controlling."

In recent years, we've seen significant progress toward destigmatizing mental health struggles and treatments including therapy, and that's a good thing. But this progress has also been impinged by a certain level of hollowness—first, because telling people to go to therapy doesn't address the underlying social conditions that cause many people's mental health struggles, and second, because of a fundamental misunderstanding of what therapy is. It's a tool for self-improvement, not a weapon to moralize our every thought, feeling, and action, while disqualifying everyone else's.

We also, frankly, help create men like Jonah Hill when we treat therapy as a blanket moral benefit; going to therapy doesn't make anyone a good person by default. It gives people the tools to work on themselves, but if they think they're automatically "good" by merit of just showing up, there's a much greater chance therapy will just lead to festering self-righteousness rather than actual self-improvement.

Hill's texts closely reflect some of the viral "therapy speak" we've previously seen, like a relationship coach's 2019 Twitter thread that offered a literal template to tell friends seeking support that you can't help them because you're at "capacity," or a psychologist's controversial TikTok earlier this year that detailed how to break up with friends. Like Hill's instructions to his then-girlfriend, all of this reflects how coopting common therapy terms can be misused to not just hurt others, but dehumanize our own friendships and relationships. Through this language, we're prompted to treat the interpersonal like business, to talk to loved ones who are hurting as a company's HR department talks to its employees.

Of course, the main problem with Hill's communications with Brady isn't the abuse of therapy speak, but the overall emotional abuse he seemingly inflicted on her. (Therapy, as domestic abuse experts have emphasized, doesn't work for abusive relationships, because, among other reasons, it's wired to be neutral in a manner that can hurt victims.)

A staggering amount of people are already siding with Hill and even blaming Brady, painting her as the problematic one for sharing screenshots of her texts with Hill—as if avoiding being rude or uncouth is better than openly talking about abuse. Brady is also being smeared by what appear to be bots posting pre-written defenses of Hill, while public figures ranging from Candace Owens to NBA star Devin Booker have gone to bat for him. The revelation of Hill's controlling behaviors—particularly

surrounding Brady's attire and what she wore in public—come shortly after Keke Palmer's baby daddy (and presumed current boyfriend) publicly shamed and humiliated her for what she wore to an Usher concert, and then received an outpouring of support from online men for "setting boundaries."

We are witnessing in real time how some men feel entitled to control their partners' lives—and that, for those who've made therapy a part of their personal brand, so-called "self-care" is just another tool in their toolbox of exerting power. Of course, it all comes down to one of the most pernicious things prevalent in our society: unexamined misogyny.